



The IMAGINE Series focuses on the hope of a different world as followers of Jesus make disciples who make disciples.



“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:37–38).

I. Introduction

Our discipleship is primarily and ultimately about a person—the God-man, Jesus! One of the significant descriptions of the first century disciples was that they could be found “ministering to the Lord” (Acts 13:2 NASB).

Consider also the extravagant love ministered by the grateful sinner in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Having washed the Master’s feet with her hair in tears and perfume, the Savior received her love and responded, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace...her sins, which are many have been forgiven, for she loved much” (Luke 7:36–50).

As we make ministering to the Lord a priority in our own life, we will experience a much-needed restoration of “loving the Lord.” Both our personal lives and our ministries will see significant change as we prioritize the One who gave, served, and ministered grace. Imagine the wonder of both personally and corporately loving Jesus and yielding our hearts as we serve the One who loves us so! Key elements in such a “ministry to Jesus” are illustrated by the one returning leper of Luke’s gospel, by Mary (the friend of Jesus who listened at His feet), and by the man born blind in the gospel of John. Join us now as we learn from these New Testament examples.

II. Loving the Lord Through Deepened Relationship

“... overflowing through many thanksgivings to God” (2 Corinthians 9:12).

The returning leper was giving Him praise: As we pursue a life of discipleship and disciple making, we must first give priority to our ministry to Jesus. We come to identify with the returning leper of Luke 17:11–19, who, after he found that he was healed, could not wait another minute or take another step without returning to honor Christ. Christ received the leper’s praise and declared that the man had given God glory (v. 18 NASB). Our

present-day ministry to Jesus will involve looking expectantly for opportunities to bring honor and glory to Him. As we consistently stop to reflect upon the marvelous grace that the Lord has provided on our behalf and voice our gratitude to Him, we minister to the Savior. As the faithful disciples give praise and honor to the Creator, we express our love and He receives the glory.

As we seek to deeply love the Lord, we will have a shift in our primary focus away from human-focused questions such as, "What do I need to do?" or "How might we be more effective in our ministry?" Rather, our focus must be upon relating to Him. We must begin to ask the questions, "What is Christ receiving from my life? Is He receiving my love?"

What is the Lord receiving from your life and ministry? How is He being lifted up? In our personal devotion and corporate worship, we want our spirits to whisper, "It is all about You, Lord. It is all about You."

While this priority on loving the Lord certainly acknowledges the essential elements of faith and obedience, the believer who seeks to minister to Jesus does not stop there.

- Unlike the nine lepers, faithful followers of Jesus conclude that there is much more to life in Christ than merely believing the right things and behaving in the right way. That "much more" is an intimate relationship with Him!
- As we enter into deepened love for Him, we will discover that our commitment to trust and obey is important, but not sufficient. In fact, our trust in Jesus and our obedience to Him are meant to lead us back to Him!
- This deepened love relationship with Jesus will be characterized by a life of thanksgiving and *listening* as faithful disciples come to deeply know him as the *real God*.



L-1 Practicing thanksgiving in all things

A. *Loving the Lord Through Thanksgiving*

"Serve the Lord with gladness" (Psalm 100:2).

Since the greatest of all the commandments is to "love God," pause to consider the question: "How is it that we really 'love God'?" Sadly, too often our response might be that we are to *do things for God*, all the while He is longing for us to *RELATE to Him!*

If God needed things done, He could enlist angels for perfect execution, without complaining. We, as His created, have the privilege of intimacy with Him, and our journey with Him in thanksgiving provides this unique opportunity. So as we approach Him in love, where do we start?

As you serve Him, bring your gift of laughter

And be glad as you worship Him!

Sing your way into His presence with joy!

Come right into His presence with thanksgiving!

You can pass through His open gates,

With the password of praise!

(Psalm 100:2, 4 The Passion Translation)

As a parent, imagine one of your teens or adult children initiating this conversation: "Mom/Dad , I'd like to take this time to share with you the gratefulness I have in my heart for all the ways that you have loved me well!"

After you have awakened from passing out at such a miracle, you, no doubt, will agree that such heart-felt expressions of gratitude communicate LOVE! You and I express our love to the Lord in many relational ways, and one of the most important is through giving thanks in all things!

Pause now to enter with thanksgiving; serve Him with a glad heart:

"Father as I reflect on the countless ways you have loved me well, my heart overflows with thanksgiving.

*I especially am grateful for how You have blessed me with _____
and You have sustained me through _____*

I praise You for your generosity and grace.

*Receive my thanksgiving and praise as a small expression of my deep love.
Amen"*

Colossians 3:16 Moment:

"Let the Word of Christ dwell deeply in you . . ." (Col. 3:16).

Pastor/Teacher:

Vulnerably share your response of thanksgiving.



L-2 Listening to and hearing God for direction and discernment

B. Loving the Lord through Listening

"Speak Lord your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:8, 9).

Recall the childhood story of *Alice in Wonderland* as Alice finds herself lost in the Enchanted Forest. Arriving at a crossing of several paths through the forest, she's confused as which to take. Uncertain and insecure, she looks up bewildered and notices in the tree above her, the Cheshire Cat. "Which way do I go?" she inquires, only to have the cat pose a critical related question: "SO WHERE ARE YOU GOING?"

"I really don't know" Alice replies. To which, the cat responds, "Then it really doesn't matter!" But follower of Jesus, it does matter!

Many followers of Jesus seem like Alice, unsure of where they are headed along the maze of events, programs, and projects being presented as the Christian life. The apostle Paul would share his burden for the believers in Corinth facing similar complexities:

"I am burdened that you have been led astray from the purity and simplicity of devotion to Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:3).

WHERE AM I HEADED as a follower of JESUS? The simple answer is in our identity. Followers of Jesus are headed toward Jesus! He is the destination. His life and character are our goal. His purposes become our passions, and "listening" for His voice becomes our practice and over time our identity.

". . . it is no longer I who live . . ." (Galatians 2:20).

Pause with a yielded heart and express your desire to practice LISTENING!



L-3 Experiencing God as He really is through deepened intimacy with Him

C. Loving the Lord Through Intimacy with the "Real God"

"Have you been so long with me and yet you don't know me?" (John 14:9).

Where are you?" the Lord asks of Adam (Genesis 3:9).

Consider the heart of God behind the question, "Where are you?" Was His intention to:

- Wipe Adam off the face of the earth when He found him?
- Or . . . Never speak to Adam again?
- Or . . . Was it to provide a way of redemption and restoration?

Sure there will be consequences to Adam's disobedience but the heart of God was filled with compassion and love as He shed innocent blood and provided covering for His created. How we view God's heart toward us determines our pursuit of intimacy with Him! Listen as He asks of you, "where are you?" If His heart is to harm you or never speak to you again, who would want to pursue closeness with that kind of "god"?

But imagine this as a parent of a preschooler in a busy shopping mall during the holidays. People are shopping and shoving; your preschooler is intrigued and distracted by everything. Then it happens! You're focused on conversation with a sales person when you look around and your preschooler is GONE! Nowhere in sight! You panic and retrace your steps. You at least think or say out loud "where are you?" Yet, consider your heart. Sure, you may be irritated at a child's impulsiveness, but underneath is your compassion, imagining your child alone and now frightened. The question "where are you" is motivated by LOVE! Imagine the embrace and relief of being reunited, relationship and security restored.

Now consider again your view of God. The *real* God is longing to love you and relate to you intimately. Only this *real* God of love would prompt your pursuit of Him.

"Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him" (Isaiah 30:18).

Pause quietly to meditate on the Lord; picture Jesus at the Father's right hand. You have been the "lost child," anxious and uncertain, and now He sees you with excitement! He rises with compassion in His heart to embrace you. Allow your heart to celebrate such a JESUS.

Experiencing God as He Really Is Through Deepened Intimacy with Him

An Experience with God's Son

Reflect on the needed priorities of thanksgiving and *listening* as you more deeply know Him.

Consider these aspects of deepened relationship and how they might need renewed emphasis in your life. Spend time meditating on the story of the returning leper and particularly the words: "Where are the other nine?" (Luke 17:17).

Pause and allow the Holy Spirit to remind you of Jesus. He's worthy to receive praise from the many He has blessed.

In your heart and mind, listen as Christ utters these words: “Where are the other nine?” Reflect again on the probable emotions of His heart. Was this yet another time that He was acquainted with sorrow (Isaiah 53:3)?

Allow the Spirit to move your heart to respond to Him. Can you sense sorrow for Him? Can you fellowship with His sufferings? Can you sense a “Godly sorrow that produces repentance” (see 2 Corinthians 7:10)? Allow His Spirit to renew in you a longing to give Christ thanks.

Picture yourself listening to Jesus as the returning leper did. “Your faith made you well” (Luke 17:19). Only in this posture of thanksgiving and listening does this one leper hear this revelation from Jesus that it’s FAITH in Him which brought healings, gratitude, and praise.

Imagine now that you join this leper, bowing before Christ, giving Him praise. Tell Him of your renewed desire to give Him thanks. Praise Him for who He really is and for all He has done.

III. Loving the Lord Brings Change

Mary of Bethany was listening to Him.

Truly “loving the Lord” will only come as we learn to remain still and listen to the Savior’s promptings, allowing Him to reveal more of Himself, His heart, and His hope for our lives. As we seek to fulfill our calling to truly love the Lord, we will emulate Mary of Bethany. The gospel of Luke records one of Christ’s many visits to this small village (Luke 10:38–42). Jesus undoubtedly saw the town of Bethany as a refuge, a safe haven from the harsh realities that awaited Him in Jerusalem. Only a short time before His betrayal and arrest, Christ returned to this place of welcome, to friends that loved Him.

All across the pages of the gospels, we find stories of changed lives as people encountered Jesus and went away different! Such is the destiny of a faithful disciple—“being transformed into His image from glory to glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18).



L-4 Rejoicing regularly in my identity as “His beloved”

A. Loving the Lord Through a Changed Identity

“I no longer call you servants . . . but rather I call you friends” (John 15:1).

I am the friend of God! He calls me friend!

As “lovers of God,” we have been declared the “beloved of God” (Colossians 3:12). We are the “people of God!” We are a “royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9).

Spirit-empowered disciples of Jesus embrace their new identity!

PRAY and Experience Scripture

“I no longer call you slaves, because a master doesn’t confide in his slaves. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me” (John 15:15 NLT).

Jesus desires a deep friendship with you. He desires to share with you, as His disciple, what He has learned from the Father. You have chosen to

Colossians 3:16 Moment:
“Let the Word of Christ dwell deeply in you . . .” (Col. 3:16).
Pastor/Teacher:
 Vulnerably share your heart’s reflections as an encouragement to your people.

follow Him, and He has chosen to share with you, reveal Himself to you, and then communicate the gospel through you.

Pause for a moment to consider this wonderful privilege. The God of the universe wants to reveal Himself to you. Because you are His disciple and His friend, Jesus wants to be vulnerable with you. How do you feel as you embrace the truth that Christ wants you to know the things that are on His heart? Respond to the Lord as His friend.

Lord Jesus, as I embrace the wonder of friendship with You, my heart responds with _____

When I consider that You long to share Your heart with me, I am moved with feelings of _____

Jesus, because I am so grateful that You want this kind of friendship with me, I am motivated to _____

(For example, spend more time reading the Bible; listen as well as talk to You in prayer; regularly ask You to reveal Yourself in me, especially when I am having a hard time, etc.)



L-5 Living with a passionate longing for purity and to please Him in all things

B. Loving the Lord Through a Change of Priorities

From the Luke 10 account, we learn of an important difference between Mary and her sister Martha, a difference that faithful followers of Christ will not want to miss. Martha was capable, eager to serve, energetic, and enthusiastic about ministry and service. Yet in her efforts to serve and demonstrate acts of kindness, Martha, in some important way, missed the eternal.

Instead of affirming Martha’s efforts, Christ brought attention to Mary. And what did Mary do? All Mary did was to pause, slow down, and sit! Yet it is where she sat that made the difference. It’s the same change from temporal to eternal priorities that will be evident in the faithful disciple’s life. Mary was not distracted by the things of this world, the relentless needs that come with ministry, or the external pressure to “have things just right.” Instead, she was focused upon listening to Jesus. As Christ affirmed His friend, He said something quite extraordinary about what Mary did: “Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10:42).

Spirit-empowered disciples, like Mary of Bethany choose the less traveled path of intimacy with the Savior.



L-6 Consistent practice of self-denial, fasting, and solitude rest

C. Loving the Lord Through a Change of Disciplines

Mary’s choice to fellowship with the Lord would count for all of eternity! Those who seek to love the Lord long to become a friend like Mary— attentively listening to the Savior’s heart.

Take a moment and consider your own priority of self-denial through simply sitting and listening to the Lord.

- How often do you pause to fast and pray—to sit at the feet of Jesus, simply listening to the Spirit’s voice, hearing the heart of your Friend?

- Has your journey with Him often led you into solitude and beyond a pursuit of His provision to a longing for His presence?
- Have you been so busy, worried, or preoccupied with challenges of life and ministry that you have forgotten to listen for the Savior's voice?

Intimate love of Jesus flows through people who become like Mary—people who choose to listen to Jesus, sit humbly at His feet, and prioritize their relationship with the One who gave His life that we might become His friends (John 15:13–15).

Listening to Jesus: "Mary . . . sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said" (Luke 10:39).

Pause and allow the Holy Spirit to bring an image of Jesus to your mind and heart. Picture Him as He withdrew from the rejection of Jerusalem, finding refuge in Bethany at the home of His friends. Possibly sensing the Savior's troubled heart, Mary sits before Him, listening quietly. You are shocked by Martha's self-focused interruption, but also startled by Christ's clear words of affirmation for Mary. "Mary has chosen what is better" (Luke 10:42).

Now imagine that you have an opportunity to be with Jesus. You might want to move to your knees and sit quietly with a reverent heart. Do not speak; just listen. The Savior longs to share His heart. Wait before Him. Listen for His words of pleasure, "You have chosen well."

Pray a quiet prayer similar to young Samuel's prayer. "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10). Allow the Spirit within you to commune with the Savior.

IV. Loving the Lord Yields to Life in the Spirit

Recall the blind man from the gospel of John, chapter 9. He was simply lying beside the road when his life was miraculously interrupted by the gracious touch of the Master. This man, who had been born blind and now was healed, shares one of the most powerful testimonies of deeply loving the Lord. Such love comes when we submit ourselves to the wonder of His ways, even though we may not fully know or understand them. John tells us that controversy arose after the man's sight was restored, and that the religious leaders threw him out of the temple. Now pause and reflect on the initiative and care of Jesus: "When Jesus heard what had happened, he went and found the man" (John 9:35 CEV). Christ then issued this challenging question: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" The blind man responded, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" (John 9:35, 36 NASB).

How was this possible? How could this blind man be so open to believing in the Son of Man? The answer is simple. In his previous experience with Jesus, he had received amazing grace, undeserved mercy, astounding blessing, and immeasurable abundance. From this foundation of trust, the blind man yielded in faith. It was as if he said, "I am committed to yield to the Son of Man. Just reveal Him to me!"



L-7 Entering often into Spirit-led praise and worship

A. Loving the Lord Through a Life of Praise and Worship

As we seek to fulfill our calling to deeply love the Lord, we will be called upon to yield to Jesus. If we truly want to bless His heart, we will faithfully trust in Him even before we fully know His plans. Our yielding, our willingness to hear from Jesus and our faith in His care will minister to the Lord.

Is such yielding taking place in your life today? Are you yielding to faith in Him or yielding to the pleadings of men? Is your fellowship so intimate and supportive that your faith can be declared even before the realities of provision come forth?

What might be hindering you from more intimate love of the Lord? What keeps you from experiencing more of a close relationship with Him? What hinders you from a life of praise and worship?

Could it be . . .

- A matter of wrong priorities?
- A struggle with materialism?
- Fearful anxiety?
- Concerns about receiving others' approval?
- Over-attention to activity or achievement?
- Preoccupation with your own plans and goals?
- Other factors?

My life of praise and worship might at times be hindered by . . .

Share your response with your partner or small group. Take time to pray together, asking God to remove these "entanglements which so easily beset us," so that we might run our race with endurance.



L-8 Disciplined, bold and believing prayer

B. Loving the Lord Through a Life of Prevailing Prayer

LEARN to Encounter Jesus

You can more easily see yourself as a person of disciplined, bold, believing prayer when you are empowered by the reality that Jesus is already praying for you.

Pause for a moment and imagine this scene: Jesus is kneeling, quietly bowed in prayer. As you get closer, you can hear Him praying—He's praying for you! The Savior of the universe is praying for the burdens of your heart and the needs in your life. We know this is true because Romans 8:34 tells us that "He is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us." What does it do to your heart to know that while you are praying to Jesus, He is praying for you?

When I imagine Jesus is praying just for me, my heart is filled with _____

When I remember that Christ sits next to God and talks to Him about my needs, I feel _____

Colossians 3:16 Moment:

"Let the Word of Christ dwell deeply in you . . ." (Col. 3:16).

Pastor/Teacher:

Vulnerably share your heart's response to Christ's intercession for you.

C. Loving the Lord Through a Life of the Supernatural

The Holy Spirit helps us do more than we can. "But you shall receive



L-9 Yielding to the Spirit's fullness as life in the Spirit brings supernatural intimacy with the Lord, manifestation of divine gifts, and witness of the fruit of the Spirit

Spirit Empowered Discipleship Places Priority on Ministering to Jesus.

- Do our ministry methods equip saints to minister to Jesus?
- Do we consistently experience Jesus and give honor to Him? How is this preeminent purpose reflected in each worship service? What changes might be necessary?
- How might Christ become *the audience*—the One to whom our thanksgiving and praise is focused?
- How might performing for the approval of man be replaced by giving Him glory?
- How might the exercise of spiritual gifts call attention to the Giver of those gifts?
- Could the exposition of Scripture involve the Spirit leading individual hearts to experience a deeper love for the One who wrote it?
- Could individuals come to not only know the truth, but to have the truth set them free to more deeply love the One who gave it?
- Could our times of personal response, altar calls, and invitations somehow become more about how individuals encounter God and less about tradition, man's expectations, or the approval of people?

power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The Spirit's power is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that those who believe in Him would do the same works He did and even greater. God's power encourages us to believe for the supernatural. After the Holy Spirit fell, the disciples performed many miracles, including but not limited to healing the sick, casting out demons, and discipling untold thousands. Unlike Spirit-touched heroes of the Old Testament who momentarily enjoyed His power, the believers in the Acts 2 church experienced the lingering, indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit will help you say more than you know. Emboldened by the Holy Spirit, Peter may be the best example of this. Right after the Spirit fell in the upper room, he stood up from among the eleven disciples, raised his voice, and addressed the crowd in a Spirit-inspired speech (Acts 2). The results were nothing short of miraculous. They baptized and added three thousand people to the church that day.

"[Out of your] innermost being shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38 NASB).

Quietly meditate on the invitation of Jesus. Imagine that He is standing before you. His eyes are kind and welcoming. His heart is tender and yet affirming. He stands before you with these words of invitation: "I've given you My Spirit to live inside you. The power of the living God can transform you, embolden your speech, and empower your witness. You have the power. You have the boldness. You have the words. Now let my Spirit flow out of you like rivers of living water." Welcome the Holy Spirit's prompting and empowerment. Thank the Lord Jesus for not leaving you alone, but coming to you through His Spirit.

Jesus, I receive all that the Spirit has given me . . .

I am thankful for the gift of the Holy Spirit, especially because . . .

D. A Life of Christ-Likeness

Perfecting Holiness in the Fear of God: The Dread of Displeasing Him

"Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1 NASB).

"Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

Imagine yourself for a moment in the days of your "first love," perhaps during your teen years or young adulthood. Recall your first case of "puppy love," or if you are married, think back to the early days of being madly in love with your spouse. If you can remember such a time, you might recall having a dread of displeasing the one you loved. At all costs, you wanted to please that person. Maybe you had to have just the right outfit, haircut, or manners. Maybe you paid the price of inconvenience, exerting great effort just to be with this person in order to please him or her. On a human level, you had a "healthy" fear of letting him or her down.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD REDEFINED: With this backdrop of an admittedly human analogy, let us reconsider our understanding of what it means to possess the "fear of the Lord," which "is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10).

- This “fear” is not just an anxious concern that we will suffer dreadful consequences for our disobedience. That is a very childlike understanding of the situation.
- Out of love, parents prescribe *consequences* for wrong behavior, and children comply in order to avoid the consequences. But as maturity comes, children begin to internalize their parents’ loving concern, so that compliance comes to be motivated by trusting love for the parents. So it is to be with Christ’s disciples.
- A dread of painful consequences may motivate short-term compliance with rules and standards, but it will not motivate our whole-hearted participation in the journey toward Christlikeness.
- Scripture addresses the limitation of this “dread of consequences” as the aging apostle John states, “There is no fear in love,” and then declares, “. . . because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

Questions to Consider:

- Would God, who graced us with His infinite, unmerited, loving favor when He saved us, now seek to motivate our walk with Him through fear of consequences?
- Would not such fear simply cause us to seek to perfect by works that which was begun by grace, thus undermining the wonder of our worth as joint heirs with Christ and replacing it with performance-based worth?

The yielding love of the Son toward the Father, which we have received through the Holy Spirit, produces not this sort of bondage to fear, but an intimate relationship based on a genuine desire to bring God pleasure. Faithful disciples experience wonder at having received the grace to please God, and dread any word, action, attitude, motive, or initiative that might displease Him.



L-10 Practicing the presence of the Lord, yielding to the Spirit’s work of Christ-likeness

Yielding to Jesus: “Tell me so that I may believe in him” (John 9:36).

Jesus loved you well just as He loved the man born blind. He has given you spiritual sight, a new identity, and the promise of eternal life in heaven.

“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give up all things?” (Romans 8:32).

If you had a stingy God, He would have never given you Jesus! Since He has blessed you with “everything we need for life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3), can you now trust Him for certain smaller things in life?

What discernment do you need concerning decisions or direction? What answers are needed concerning people or provision?

Pause now and thank God for past blessings. Then imagine yourself bowed before Him, yielding to Him. Declare your intentions to Him: *“I yield my choice, my will, and my future to You. As You reveal, my heart is yielded to follow in the power of Your Spirit.”*

Close in prayer, as you share with your partner or small group.

“Lord Jesus, I sense the need to be more like . . . (the leper, Mary, the blind man), giving priority to . . . (sharing praise, listening to Your voice or yielding to Your will).”